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Beachgoers get more elbow room

By Jenny Maher, Delaware
State News



REHOBOTH BEACH — Every July 4 weekend, more than 80,000 people gather along Rehoboth Beach to watch the sky light up with splashes of color, at the annual Independence Day fireworks show.

And, this year, visitors will have more room than ever to sit back and enjoy the show, courtesy of a \$10.3 million beach restoration project funded by both the state and the federal government.

No longer will guests be forced to clamor for a spot on a slim beach.

Instead, they will find wide stretches of sand, perfect for sunbathing, beach volleyball games and sandcastle building.

Rehoboth Beach city manager Greg Ferrese said that the project, which began in late May, should be completed by next Saturday or Sunday, with the bulk of work done by July 4.

He is certain beach-goers will be pleasantly surprised by the additions made to the shoreline.

"About three weeks ago, things were terrible," he said. "We only had 15 feet of beach in some areas during high tide, and now there's 175 feet. It's an amazing difference."

The added sand was dredged from an area near the Indian River Inlet, as part of a project designed by the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers.

The same process occurred in Dewey Beach from February through May, when 150 yards of sand were added to the beach, said town manager Gordon Elliott.

Dewey Beach received more sand based on the understanding that the current will transport some of that sand to Rehoboth Beach over time.

"I've never seen [Dewey Beach] this large before," Mr. Elliott said. "Everyone comments on it. If this project didn't happen this year, we wouldn't have had any visitors because they wouldn't have had any beach to sit on."

The erosion in both Rehoboth Beach and Dewey Beach was the result of such natural causes as waves, tides, currents, storms and winds.

In order to help prevent severe erosion in the future, the beaches will be

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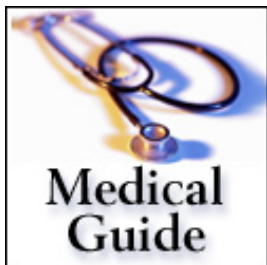
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replenished every three or four years, as part of a 50-year, \$118 million project.

High dunes have also been constructed to help protect the newly replenished beaches, and the sand that was pumped in from Indian River is noticeably coarse and less likely to be swept away by wind and water.

Rehoboth Beach Patrol Capt. Kent Buckson said visitors should be aware of the rough sand, which contains more seashells and rockfish than the softer sand they are used to.

"There's been some problems with nicks and cuts on feet," he said. "You might want to wear flip-flops, although it's still okay to walk barefoot. It's just a little different. We've had a few complaints."

He also cautioned that surfers should be extra careful when riding waves.

"They're more susceptible to injuries now, due to the shore break," he said. "There's more of a drop-off now, whereas in the past there was a gradual slope. We've seen a couple neck injuries, but nothing too serious — a few bruises and strains."

Mr. Buckson said he hired "three or four" new lifeguards this year, in anticipation of the beach replenishment.

And, because the Rehoboth Beach Patrol team now has a larger area to monitor, Mr. Buckson is contemplating adding two new lifeguard stands to the beach.

The replenishment project also prompted the city to purchase a new four-wheel drive vehicle, which lifeguards can use to help transport injured swimmers across the wide beach to the boardwalk.

"We've been adjusting OK, as far as safety goes," Mr. Buckson said. "It's a learn as you go process."

Mr. Ferrese said the positives of the beach replenishment far outweigh any negatives and he is expecting many rave reviews from tourists following the July 4 weekend.

"Out of thousands of visitors, we've had minimal complaints," he said. "Our visitors are going to feel more comfortable now that there's more beach, and our businesses and boardwalk will be protected from storms and damage, whereas before they were more vulnerable."

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